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THE WILL TO SURVIVE THE HOLOCAUST

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To The Claims Conference

I am Gussie Wechsler-Jorisch. My European name is Gusta, born Jan. 7 1923 in Skalat Poland (Galicia). I was born into a well to do family. My parents and grandparents were in the wholesale and retail fabric business. We lived with our Grandparents who I adored. My grandpa Marcus Perlmutter was super smart. People from town used to come to him for advice. He was considered one of the town's wise men. My parents and grandparents were orthodox and we were a happy family.

We owned the home located on Rynek #4. We lived upstairs and the business was downstairs. I went to Public school and had lots of friends both Jewish and non-Jewish. When Hitler came my gentile friends turned their backs on me. Many of my parents and grandparents business associates turned their backs pretending that they didn't know them.

One Day I was in the street and my gentile friends passed me by. I wanted to talk to them but they did not respond. They just walked away as if they did not know me. We used to study and go out together before Hitler came.

I will never forget in the year 1938 the Polish and Ukrainian priests were preaching hatred toward Jews. On Sundays during the mass the parishioners were fed lectures of anti-Semitism. After the mass they came out from the churches. They caught Jews in the street, pulling their beards, spitting and beating on them. It happened to my Grandpa. They pulled his beard and beat him. Grandpa could not report this incident to the police. They would not do a thing because he was Jewish.

In 1939 the Russians occupied our region. When they left Hitler marched in. It was 1940 when the killing began. No one realized that they came to get rid of the Jewish population. We did not have televisions or radio those years. We were completely closed and we did not know what was going on in the neighboring towns. We were completely in the dark cut off from the world.

When the Germans came the first thing they did was ask the Ukrainian priests how to get rid of the Jews and also in which order to do the killing. The priests told them that it is best to get rid of all of the Jews. The Germans decided to first round up the orthodox Jews. So The Poles and Ukrainians put on their rifles and with the Germans went door to door to show them where Jewish families reside. Without the help from Ukrainians and Poles the Nazis could never do the job they did.

The Nazis gave them permission to kill and rob and to do whatever they desire to the Jews. The Ukrainians and Poles worked together with the Nazis in getting rid of the Jews.

The first victim was a Rabbi from our town. They pulled him out into the middle of the Rynek Street where there was a water well. They pulled his beard off and then pumped water into his mouth until he busted.

Then two Ukrainians with riffles showed up at our doorstep. They came into our home and ordered my Grandpa to go with them because he was orthodox. I begged them to let me go with my Grandpa. Not realizing what's going to happen to us, they let me accompany my Grandpa.

They took both of us to the middle of the square which was called Rynek. The Poles and Ukrainians started beating both of us with rubber sticks and threatened to kill us. Since I spoke Ukrainian I overheard them saying in the Ukrainian language that they are going to take both of us to the water well and do the same thing they did to the Rabbi. I was crying and begged them to let us go but they would not. A German soldier

heard the commotion. He came over and I begged him to let us go. He ordered us to go back to our home.

It was very frightening. We were both in shock and also black and blue from the beating we received. As we walked into the house Grandpa felt sick. I helped him into our home where he collapsed.

After a few weeks they came back to look for women, children, elderly and the sick. They walked around our home like wild animals looking all over. Luckily this time they did not find us because we built hiding places like double attics and double walls, where everyone was hiding. As of that time we did not sleep at night. We never removed our clothes knowing that eventually they would be back.

After a few weeks the murderers came again to find more victims. This time unexpectedly they caught a lot of people in the street. They pulled a lot of people from homes. Between six hundred to eight hundred people were caught. They brought all the victims to the synagogue. From there they were taken to the outskirts of Skalat. The people had to dig their own graves. Some victims were thrown in half alive. The Germans used to treat little kids like chickens. They would grab them by the foot and throw them into the pits without even shooting the children. A friend of mine was thrown into the grave alive. She tried desperately to get out but she was unable to because dead bodies were on top of her.

The following morning a guy from the village passed by and saw moving legs and hands sticking out from the grave. He pulled her out and brought her to the ghetto. She was still alive but died the next day.

Two weeks before Rosh Hashonah on October 26.1942 came the fatal day 3,000 people were taken to the gas chambers in Belzec Poland. Around 4 a.m. we heard loud noises in the street. Everybody ran to the basement to hide but they never made it. The murderers broke all the doors and windows and surrounded everybody.

They caught my mother my father my sister who was 8 years old, my grandpa, aunts uncles and cousins. Those murderers pulled out everybody from the basement. I did not get a chance to go to the basement because it was too late for me. I heard the German voices. Instead of giving myself up I decided to hide in the back of a caddy corner closet. Since I was small and skinny I could fit into that space.

Thinking that eventually they will find me, I stuck myself in back of the closet and sat there all day and all night. The following day was very quiet like after a war. I did not hear the German Polish and Ukrainian language. I crawled out from my hiding space looking for my family, unfortunately I did not see anybody. I was told they all were taken to the synagogue. From the synagogue they were shoved into the cattle trains and taken to the gas chambers in Belzec.

My mom, sister 8 years old, grandpa, uncles, cousins were all murdered in the gas chambers. My father was with the rest of the family but he was separated and sent to slave labor camp. The name of the camp was`Kamionki, where he was humiliated, beaten forced to do hard work, and starved. They hardly gave him food.

It was very sad when I found out that the all of my family was gone and I became very sick, and lonely like a lost sheep without a family not knowing what to do and where to go. Luckily I had a boyfriend who later became my husband. He kept me alive. I can honestly say thanks to my husband I am alive today. He cared for me and worried about me.

While I was hiding in back of the closet no one knew what happened to me. Somebody told my boyfriend that I was caught by the Nazis and that I was in the synagogue with the rest of my family. He went to give himself up to be with me. They pushed him into the synagogue. He was looking for me but I wasn't there. Since there was a lot of commotion and turmoil, he sneaked out of the synagogue and stood in line with other young guys that were ordered to go to camp. A drunken Nazi came over to him and with his rifle beat him over his head body and face. He saw all the stars. He

was bleeding and ready to give up. The Nazi told him to go back to the synagogue with the rest of the Ferfluchte Jude (which means cursed Jews) and the Nazi also said this is where you belong.

After getting a horrible beating my boyfriend was still conscious. Not to give up he took a chance and stepped in line with the guys. He was afraid that the Nazi and Ukrainians will recognize him and kill him on the spot. He had no choice so he stepped in line with the guys and went to the camp. The reason they did not notice him was because the Nazis, Ukrainians and Poles were busy drinking dancing and laughing. It was a miracle he survived that day. Because of me he would have paid with his life.

After that fatal day we were ordered to vacate our homes and move into the ghetto. We were not allowed to take out our belongings. We had to leave everything except for one or two changes of clothes. Fifty to sixty people were squeezed into one room. People were dying from hunger and we did not have any food. Some died from Typhoid. We were not permitted to go to town to buy food.

I'll never forget that there was a young woman who went into convulsions and died from Typhoid. We were ordered to go to work every morning at the railroad station to build railroad tracks. The Nazis were standing over us with guns and rifles watching us. We had to work without interruption and without food, if not they would kill us. The company in charge at the railroad tracks was named Otto-Heil.

After a couple of months the Germans decided to liquidate the Ghetto and moved us to slave labor camps. My brother Buzi was younger than me. He was also in the Ghetto. He promised to come the next morning because he did not to leave his girlfriend. The following morning on the way to camp wearing a yellow arm band with the word "Jude" (Jew) he was stopped by a Ukrainian guy and was ordered to step back. The Ukrainian shot him the neck. My brother was struggling and the Ukrainian guy was standing over his body laughing and kicking him. A German soldier came and shot him a couple of times until he expired.

They brought my bothers coat and boots to camp. I was asked if I want to keep it but told them that the clothes without my brother were too painful so I refused. Now we were in the slave labor camp doing hard and dirty work every morning. We were forced to go to the railroad station carrying heavy beams and pushing carts with rocks. There were times I felt tired and wanted to take a little rest. I was not allowed to rest. The Germans beat me with a rubber stick around my face and my shoulders and head until I was bleeding. I was not allowed to wash the blood off. I had to keep on working until it was time to go back to camp. I was told that if I was sick or tired they would shoot me like a dog.

My boyfriend was also working at the railroad. One day one of the Germans noticed that he was not working fast enough. He was carrying the railroad beam too slow. They came over and beat him with a night stick and rifle all over his face and his body. He did not think he would survive. When he returned to camp no one recognized him. He was black and blue and bleeding. When I came back to camp they made me wash the toilets and floors. They gave us very little food. Soup was the only thing they gave us. The soup looked and tasted like dirty dish water with a small piece of bread. That was the day's rationing. I don't know what got me through the camp. I can only attribute this to being young. Living in a slave labor camp was pure hell. They treated us as if we were animals. We were not considered human beings.

The Germans decided to liquidate Kaminki labor camp. They transferred my father and other people to the Skalat slave labor camp. I was very happy to see my father.

There was a time the Germans found out that there was a Jewish guy in town who owned a gun. He did want to give himself up and he did not want to give the Nazis the gun. Because of it the Nazis caught eleven people as collateral. There were ten guys and one woman. My friend was one of them. They were taken to the cemetery and lined up against the wall to be shot. They were beaten and humiliated. Luckily the woman they caught was the mother in-law of the guy in charge of the Jewish committee. His name was Nirler. In order to get his mother in-law out of the camp he

negotiated with the Nazis. He had to give them a lot of money and gold and then they let all eleven people go free.

One day we heard rumors that the Germans were going to liquidate the camp and kill everyone to make the town completely free of Jews and "Judenfrei". A group of teenagers in which I was included decided that instead of being tortured we would try to escape from the camp into the forest in the middle of the night.

They did not want to take my father because he was too old. At the time he was about forty-three years old. I decided not to go. Whatever happens to my father would happen to me. I was not going to leave him alone to be killed. They changed their mind and decided to take him with us.

The camp was barb wired. The guys from the group investigated as to where and what spot would be easy to escape. We decided that no matter what would happen we would escape. I don't remember the exact time but it was in the middle of the night that we started out on our journey to the forest. It was scary. We did not think that we would make it but there was no other choice. We had to take a chance. It was live or die. The Germans with their German Sheppard's were all over guarding the camp. The hardest thing was to sneak through the barbed wire and the swamps. We did it.

Walking through the swamps my father's foot got stuck in the mud. My husband Martin who was my boyfriend at the time pulled him out of the mud. He pulled him out of the mud and put him on his shoulders and carried him through the mud and the lake. It was unbelievable. He acted pretty quickly. If not we would have been in big trouble. The Nazis would have ripped us to pieces. We did not want to be caught alive because they would beat the hell out of us, torture us and bring us back to town to be an example. They would have hanged us in the middle of town to let the poles and Ukrainians know that they caught the Jews who tried to escape. It would have been an example to the Jews in camp that if they tried to escape that they would have faced the same punishment.

Once we were at the other side of the lake we felt a little safer. We were now on the way to the forest. The forest was about five miles from the lake. Tired, exhausted and beat we finally reached to forest of Ostra Mogila "Galicia". Thinking that this was our last chance to live or die like animals. For now the forest would be the place that we

have to live. Of course we wanted very much to live. Our wish was to survive at least for a few hours and see Hitler dead. For the next thirteen months we lived in the forest. The forest was our home.

We found a bunker and slept in it. During the day we were running through the forest looking for food. It was too dangerous to stay in one place. As of now we needed some food and water. We could not just live on fresh air. We were happy to find a water well to wash ourselves and drink the water. It did not take too long. The Ukrainians and Poles found out that Jews were using the water from the water well. They threw rocks a mud in to the water well. We could not use it anymore. That was the end of the water. We had to rely on rain or snow.

Life without water became unbearable. We could not wash ourselves. We became infested with lice. They were multiplying by the thousands. It became unbearable. Some of our friends were scratching themselves to death. A few of them died from infestation. Eventually they died from blood poisoning. We tried to keep ourselves as clean as possible but it was very difficult. We had to think about food. We could not just live on fresh air. We decided to go to the field and steal potatoes.

We used to make a fire at night and bake the potatoes and eat them. Potatoes were the only thing we could get. We looked like skeletons. Our intestines were so dry that we could not even digest the potatoes.

One day while we were roaming around in the woods a guy came over and offered to sell us bread, milk and soup. The only way to get it was to come to his home. Also it would have to be at night. Everyone got nervous thinking that he wanted to trick us and call the Germans to tell them that he has Jews in his home. My friend Martin offered to take chances to go and get the food for the rest of the group. Everyone was dehydrated. We felt that if we did not go for the food we would get sick.

One of the guys from the group and my friend Martin and I decided to go. We walked throught the forest in the middle of the night and heard voices. It was a group of guys speaking Ukrainian and Polish. They ordered us to stop. They started asking us questions about who we were and where we were going. I told them we are Jews and going to get a few potatoes from the field. They ordered us to back up a few feet and they were ready to shoot us. Suddenly a guy on a horse came and asked what all the

commotion was. The Ukrainian guys said that they caught three Jews and they were going to kill us. They guy on the horse spoke Russian and told us to leave the area and told us that the Ukrainians and Poles were simply on a mission to kill and they would kill.

We had no choice but to go back. Everyone was disappointed because there was no food. In a way they were happy that we came back alive. They begged us not to go again because it was too dangerous. We never went for food again to the village because of fear of being killed.

One day as we were roaming around in the woods a woman approached me and asked me if I could knit sweaters. In return for knitting she would give me food. Since the food meant a lot to us I went in to the barn and started knitting although I put my life in danger.

One Sunday morning as I was sitting in the barn knitting the Germans came to the village. The woman quickly gave me a kerchief to put on my head to look like a peasant girl. She told me to take the cow into the field and disappear. I did what I was told. I got to the woods and disappeared and left the cow in the field. If I would not have disappeared the Germans would have killed me and the cow in the middle of the field. It was very frightening. By the time I reached the group I was out of breath.

It was one day during the winter when the thermometer reached thirty below zero. The German murderers accompanied by the Ukrainians and Poles came to the woods to look for us. They heard from the villagers that Jews were living in the woods. Whenever the Germans were planning to kill Jews the Ukrainians and Poles would accompany them. They enjoyed seeing dead Jews. We left the cave in order to run to another section. I had a thin dress and was barefoot. There was not enough time to put my shoes on. As we started to run I turned blue and frozen. I could not talk and could not walk. I froze like ice. The color that was on my face was grey and blue. My friend Martin and my father carried me back to the cave. They took their jackets off and covered my body. They also put straw and leaves on top of me to keep me warm.

My friend Martin started mouth to mouth resuscitation and massaged my body until my body temperature became normal. It took a while for me to recover which was a miracle. As I fell asleep my sister's face appeared with tears running down her face.

She was trying to tell me something and disappeared. I must have been dreaming because she was already killed in the gas chambers in Belzec, Poland. When I recovered everyone was happy for me. They thought I would not make it and would not survive. I guess it was meant for me to live and continue my struggle. As of now, living in the woods became a horror. We were full of lice which was difficult to get rid of. We were praying for rain or snow so we could have a little water to drink and wash our faces. It is hard to describe. We were ready to give up instead of struggling. We lived in constant fear of being killed and we were without food and we were filthy. Since the people in the village knew that Jews were living in the woods we had a feeling that one day they would come to kill us to make the forest free of Jews "Judenfrei".

As for our group we were all teenagers except for my father who was about forty three years old and there was a little boy who was about nine years old. During the day we were roaming into the woods to check for sections that had a lot of bushes and trees which would be safe for us to hide. At night we would sit together and plan what to do if they attacked us. There was not really much we could do. We were not armed to defend ourselves. My husband suggested that we should separate into a few groups so that if the Germans came we might have a better chance to survive. We still stayed together and hated to part.

We were about twenty five people and it was like one family. Like sisters and brothers struggling together to stay alive and survive together. My husband said that in case the murderers come to get us he would not want to be tortured. He just wanted to be shot while running away. He told me that I should do the same.

One early morning we heard a loud noise which sounded like a fallen tree. We had a feeling that the Germans came to kill us. Sure enough we were right. My husband told us to move a few feet away. He felt as if someone sounding like his mother who was already dead appeared, she pushed him and said move away a little and you might have a chance to survive if you listen to me.

Me, my husband, my father, my sister-in-law and a friend moved about thirty feet away from the group. The bushes' were real thick. We knelt down and waited. It did not take too long when a big German Sheppard like a bull jumped into us. My father was

ready to scream. He did not because my husband put his hands to my father's mouth to stop him from screaming and we were ready to run.

The German Sheppard quickly jumped to the other group. The little boy started screaming. Now the German killers heard the screaming from the little boy. They followed the dog and the sound. They ran like wild animals. They ran to the group and cut through the bushes near us. Being so excited that they found Jews they did not notice us. As soon as they got to the group a shot rang out. They shot the little boy and his mother was screaming and crying. The Germans told them to take their belongings and follow them. Since extra belongings were also there the Germans kept asking where the Jews from the remaining belongings were. No one said anything.

They took our friends to the outskirts of the woods. They had to dig the pits themselves. They were shot and thrown into the pits. We were sitting about thirty feet away from the group and waiting for the killers to come back and get us. After the killing the Germans went to the village of Ostra-Mogila and neighborhood villages. They also went to the town of Skalat and announced that they killed the Jews in the forest and that the forest is free of Jews "Judenfrei".

The Germans, Poles and Ukrainians were dancing and drinking in the street for joy that they got rid of the Jews. In the meantime me and my husband, my father, my sister-in-law and a friend were still waiting for the killers to come and get us. It became very quiet like after a storm. We were still sitting afraid to move. Late in the afternoon it started to rain. It turned into a rainstorm as if the sky opened. It was raining two days and two nights. We were still sitting afraid to move. We were soaking wet, hungry and ready to die from hunger. Luckily it was raining so we drank rainwater. We were afraid that the Germans would be back to kill us. We could not take it anymore.

My husband wanted to take a chance and go to the village to get some food. I was not going to let him go because whenever the Germans saw a guy they did not like they checked the private parts to find out if he was Jewish. Also Poles and Ukrainians knew who was Jewish. So me and my sister in law decided to go to the village to the guy who offered to sell food a while ago.

We started out on the third night. The guy who lived on the outskirts of the village was shocked to see us. He could not believe that we were alive since the Germans

announced that they killed everyone. The guy sold us a little food and told us to go back to the woods. The few of us remaining alive became depressed because we lost our friends. We did not know what to do and what would happen to us. We still were not ready to give up. We still hoped that a miracle would happen and that we would survive.

Without food it was not easy. We still had to steal potatoes. It was a real nightmare and we had no strength to live. With the lice it became unbearable. We were filthy and it was a nightmare. We had delousing sessions very often. But the more we tried to get rid of them the more they would multiply.

It is important for me to explain that In Galicia we had a few orthodox rabbis. Each of the Rabbis had supporters and followers. In a town called Husiatin where rebbe lived he was called the Husiatin Rabbi. Every year the Rabbi would come to Skalat for the Jewish holiday called Shavout. He was a holy man and his supporters came to visit him. They would study the bible and have discussions. They would dance together. If someone was sick the Rabbi would prescribe a home remedy and medication. My parents and grandparents were Rabbi Husiatin supporters. The Rabbi was a very special person. I could never forget his snow white beard and white hair. My parents took me along to visit the Rabbi. I was very excited to meet him.

While living in the woods during the holocaust, one night I had an unbelievable dream. Rabbi appeared in my dreams like a good angel. He looked at me and said hang in there, help is on the way. When I woke up at first I was thinking about it and said to myself that this dream would surely have a meaning. I couldn't imagine that the Rabbi would appear in my dreams. I was young and not orthodox. I was trying to take my dream apart and put it together like a puzzle. I decided to tell my husband and my father. I told them about my dream and they thought I was crazy and hallucinating. This dream will stay with me for the rest of my life. I cannot forget his face. Rabbi was there to bring good news.

A few weeks later we were walking around in the forest and met a guy we knew. He told us that it looks like the war will be over soon and that the Germans are running away. We were hoping that he was telling us the truth.

One day a group of partisans came to the forest. We got very nervous thinking that they came to kill us. They told us that the war will be over soon. We could not believe it. They happened to be right. For about three to four weeks we lived in in a battleground. The shooting intensified. We heard gunfire shots, missiles, and mortars being fired over our heads. The soldiers were running. This time we were sure it would be the end of us. Someone would kill us or we would be killed from the gunfire.

It took weeks until the Russian army came to the forest and told us that we are free and that the war is over. They put us on the army trucks and took us to their barracks. They gave us food and clothes. We looked like skeletons. We did not have strength anymore. The Russian soldiers brought us to Skalat and from then on we were on our own. We didn't know where to go and what to do. We decided to go to my husband sister's home. The home was located on the same street of the medical clinic of Skalat.

We came to the home which was occupied by a Ukrainian family. At first she was surprised that we were alive. She said that she thought that Hitler killed all the Jews. Then she said that this was her home and that she has no room for us. If we don't disappear from the property she would call her son in law who is a policeman. He would shoot us and get rid of our bodies and we would disappear from the face of the earth and no one would ever know what happened to us. They would think that Hitler killed us.

Since we had no place to go I was crying and begged her to let us sleep just one night. She said that she has a spare room for just one night but we were not allowed to use the door. We had to climb through the window. We did not have a choice. It got dark outside so we decide to sleep over. Early in the morning we climbed out the window and decided to leave.

We went to town to meet a couple of survivors. We were afraid to remain in Skalat because the people form town would kill us. They said, what the hell are you doing in Skalat, and that we did not belong there. We should disappear or there would be another massacre.

The Ukrainians and Poles occupied our homes and stole all of our belongings. My family left a lot of silver, gold, fur coats and furniture and many expensive items. I

asked the guy that occupied my home about some of the items. He slammed to door in front of my face and told us to disappear or he would kill us. This is what we encountered when we asked for our homes and out belongings. Since we had no place where to live, and they hated us and they could not stand us being alive they were also afraid that we would ask for our properties to be returned. We had to leave Skalat. The hatred towards us was too great. They eventually would kill us.

Being afraid to ask for rides because we were Jews we decided to walk to another town. After a while we got tired of walking and our feet swelled. We hitched a ride to another town called Zbaraz where Poles and Ukrainians hated us also. We could not stay there either, and it was scary. We took off also hitching a ride to another town called Krakow also Chestochowa. Then we went to Warsaw and Lodz. In Lodz we found a little room to live. We were looking for jobs but could find none because we were Jews.

One day we were in the market and there were alot of people which were mostly Poles. One Polish guy jumped out from the crowds and punched my husband for no reason at all. My husband fell on the sidewalk and passed out. His glasses broke. A Russian soldier came over and caught the Pole that hit my husband. The officer asked him why did you hit the Jewish man. The Pole said because he hates Jews. He was sorry why Hitler didn't kill all the Jews and he wanted to finish the job. The Russian soldier arrested him. We had no choice but to leave Poland since there was no future for us.

This time we hitched a ride to the Chek border and sneaked into Germany. We checked into the displaced persons camp. For four years we lived in Germany in the displaced persons camp in Degendorf, Germany waiting for the quota to go to the United States. The day finally arrived January 1949. We arrived at the United States. This was an unbelievable day and we were crying for happiness. We could not believe it was for real.

As I am writing about my life under Hitler's occupation and the way we survived the Holocaust. I just can't believe I am alive and living a normal life. It is a miracle. It was a mental and physical ordeal and it was a hell on earth. The will to live was unbelievable. The harder it became for us, the will to live was greater. When a person's

life is in danger you realize that life is so precious. Our lives were temporary. We were alive but in reality we were not as alive as we should have been. Struggling to survive we could never enjoy our teenage life. Hitler robbed our lives away but we are grateful to be alive. The only reason we had to live through those horrors was because we were Jews and it was pure hell.

I believe that out of six million Jews we were left to tell the world what happened to European Jewry. I hope and pray it will never happen again.

Gusta Wechsler-Jorisch